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ABSTRACT

Since cassette recordings are used to teach foreign languages, why not also use them to teach English? This study tested the use of tape cassette messages to criticize student papers. One group of students in beginning freshman English classes heard tape recorded criticisms of their papers; another group served as a control. Overall, it was found that the cassettes did not improve writing skills. One instructor did obtain much greater improvement with cassette groups, but for all classes the groups without cassettes averaged the greatest improvement. However, those students who were in the cassette groups rated cassette criticisms either as extremely more effective or more effective than other techniques. The results of this study suggest that criticizing writing by using cassettes might result in greater improvement in writing skills for students of some teachers, and that more research should be done in this area. (Author/SH)

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Final Report

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AN EVALUATION OF THE USE OF CASSETTES FOR CRITICISM OF STUDENT WRITING

Richard J. Andre
Department of English and Journalism
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

January 1972

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
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ABSTRACT

Project No. 1-H-019
An Evaluation of the Use of Cassettes for Criticism of Student Writing

The project tested this hypothesis: Criticizing writing by use of cassettes will result in significantly greater growth in writing skills than will criticizing by other methods.

For this evaluation, pre- and post-test themes from classes of two instructors were graded and tabulated to compare improvement of groups using cassettes with groups not using cassettes.

Overall, the hypothesis was apparently disproved. One instructor did obtain much greater improvement with cassette groups, but for all classes, the "no cassettes" control groups averaged the greatest improvement (31.1 percent to 7.3 percent in the next higher group). For the contrasting instructor's section, themes of "no cassettes" students improved less than "cassettes only" students for both take-home (29 percent to 31.5 percent) and impromptu (30.4 percent to 93.3 percent).

One of the two instructors gained significantly greater improvement through the use of cassettes. Also, the longer term performance of students from the other instructor's previous "cassette" classes were higher than the average from those classes. Therefore, further study is necessary and should include more teachers and students for a full school year.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project No. 1-H-019
An Evaluation of the Use of Cassettes for Criticism of Student Writing

Introduction . . . . . page 1

Method . . . . . page 2

Results . . . . . page 4

Conclusions . . . . . page 5

Appendices:

Improvement in Writing . . . . . page 7

Table 1: Take-home & Impromptu Themes Combined . page 8
Table 2: Take-home Themes . . . . . page 9
Table 3: Impromptu Themes . . . . . page 9
Table 4: Take-home Themes . . . . . page 10
Table 5: Impromptu Themes . . . . . page 10
Table 6: Take-home Themes . . . . . page 11
Table 7: Impromptu Themes . . . . . page 11
Table 8: Take-home Themes . . . . . page 12
Table 9: Impromptu Themes . . . . . page 12

Questionnaire: Criticism of taped criticisms . . . page 14

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INTRODUCTION:

Since cassette recordings are used to teach foreign languages, why not also use them to teach the English language?

A project completed during the summer of 1971 was designed to determine if use of cassettes could aid in one aspect of teaching the English language--writing. The technique has since been adopted by a teacher of English for foreign students. He is convinced that use of cassettes helps in teaching writing. Those who have used the technique -- including, of course, the students -- have tended to believe that the use of cassettes in criticizing writing is more human and effective than other methods of instruction.

Enthusiasm for the technique has been reported by instructors at Stanford University, Brigham Young University, and other schools, as well as Utah State University. At USU, on an informal but detailed questionnaire, 25 percent of the students who answered, rated cassette criticisms as "extremely more effective" than other techniques. The other 75 percent rated cassette criticisms as "more effective."

For a department to purchase cassette recorders or players, however, objective evidence must demonstrate that use of cassettes improves instruction sufficiently to justify the expense, time, and trouble for department, instructor and student. No such objective evidence was available in early 1971.

The project reported here was created to gather the lacking objective evidence. It tested this hypothesis: Criticizing of writing by use of cassettes will result in significantly greater growth in writing skills than will criticizing by other methods.

METHOD:

Beginning freshman English classes were tested during the summer of 1971 by: (1) dividing students and use of cassettes by instructors, (2) objectively grading themes, and (3) evaluating the results.

A total of 53 students was divided into three sections. Sections 1 and 3 were taught by the project director. Section 2 was taught by an individual with no previous experience in teaching with cassettes. Each section was divided into relatively equal groups, giving each student his first or second choice among three groups.

Group 1 -- About one-third of the students listened to cassette "read-alongs" of returned papers in place of attending a general class critique of returned papers.

Group 2 -- Another one-third attended the general class critique, but they also listened later to the individual cassette "read-alongs" of their returned papers.

Group 3 -- The remaining students served as the control group, attending the general class critique and receiving normal written comment and other assistance from the instructor, but never using the cassettes.

Each student in a group using cassettes purchased his own cassette, and cassette players were made available in the audio-visual area of the library. Each instructor in the project used the cassettes in whatever way seemed most appropriate for the individual students, usually limiting himself to approximately the same amount of time that he would have spent with each paper if not using a cassette. However, the instructor who was new to the technique found that he was spending more time than before -- both for groups using and the group not using cassettes. For each of five writing assignments during the term, each instructor had his critique cassettes include such material as:

a. Instructions for revising the paper or for writing a new paper or exercise.

b. A request to see the instructor in his office for some help which required two-way communication.

c. References to pertinent sections of the text, class notes or the dictionary.

d. A discussion of repeated errors or problems, with suggestions and comments on ways to correct or avoid them.

Photographic copies of pre- and post-test themes were graded by three instructors who were connected with the project only as graders. Each of the three objective graders received his own unmarked copy of the relevant themes, with no identification on the copy except a number to be used in recording results. Each grader was experienced in teaching freshman English, and each was to grade the papers according to the standards he would expect from his students at the particular stage of the term. They were given minimum information on the objectives of the instructor in assigning the theme, but they were given detailed information on breaking down the grading.

In the first or second week of the term, graders were given one impromptu (or in-class) and one out-of-class theme from each student. This was originally to have been completed in the first week, but changes in registration and in class assignments for the instructors caused delays. A few weeks before the end of the term, graders were given another set of out-of-class and impromptu themes.

The grading system followed was essentially that of the English Department at Utah State University. Each grader used the letter grades of A through F for four grades for each theme: overall effectiveness, development of ideas, organization, and mechanics. Graders were asked not to be concerned if the subdivision grades did not average out to equal the overall grade.

Results were evaluated primarily in terms of pre- and post-test theme grades. Two supplementary methods of evaluation used were student reactions as indicated on an anonymous questionnaire and performances of past student users of cassettes.

To record and compare the percentage of change of the student work, point values were assigned to the letter grades. Originally, the point value was to follow the traditional scale of 4.0 for an A, 3.0 for a B, and so on. However, the figures caused too many problems and errors as totals and averages were being determined from a series of such grades as B- (2.67), D- (.67) and C- (1.67). Consequently, we converted to this scale: 12 = A, 11 = A-, 10 = B+, 9 = B, 8 = B-, 7 = C+, 6 = C, 5 = C-, 4 = D+, 3 = D, 2 = D-, and 1 =F. Once these point values were totalled and averaged, we were able to use tables to determine accurately how the performance of a student, group or section compared with the average, and with the control groups. Thus, all results in this study are expressed in terms of the 12-point scale and percentage of improvement (positive or negative).

An anonymous questionnaire (Appendix 2) was distributed in the last week of the term, with students returning them on a volunteer basis. Past student users of cassettes were included by referring to the grades made by members of 1968 and 1969 remedial English classes of the project director during their subsequent three quarters of regular Freshman English.

In the opinion of the project director, the basic method of comparing percentages of change seems to be adequate for such a study.

RESULTS:

The two teachers involved in the project produced differing results. The project, therefore, was inconclusive; but an expanded study or one that lasted a longer period of time might yield more conclusive and helpful results.

Greater improvement was achieved by students in the "no cassettes" group (31.1 percent) than in the "cassettes only" (7.3 percent) or the "cassettes-plus-class" (1 percent) groups (Appendix 1, Table 1). The only exception was the improvement in organization (6.5 percent) for the "cassettes only" groups compared to 6.1 percent for the "no cassettes" groups. However, these results contrast sharply with those shown in Tables 4 and 5 for the single section not taught by the project director. In this section, themes of "no cassettes" groups improved less than "cassettes only" groups for both take-home (29 percent to 31.5 percent) and impromptu (30.4 percent to 93.3 percent). The only clear agreement between overall results (Tables 2 and 3) and results for that section summarized in Tables 4 and 5 is that the lowest percentage of improvement was in the "cassettes-plus-class" group.

The data in Tables 2 and 3 indicate a need to study the percentages for individual sections. For instance, considering all take-home themes, the "no cassettes" group showed consistently better improvement (20.7 percent) than did the second highest group, "cassettes only" (15.8 percent). Yet, the "cassettes only" students were slightly higher than the "no cassettes" group in both organization (10.9 to 9.0 percent) and development (10.9 to 10.5 percent). The data in Tables 4, 6, and 8 show that the instructor of section 2 obtained better results in development and organization, while the instructor of sections 1 and 6 obtained better results in mechanics. The emphasis on mechanics, apparently, counterbalances total results in development and organization -- and vice versa.

Those differences indicate that the results of the study were less conclusive than they might have been because one teacher was teaching two-thirds of the students involved. Another variable was the low number of students involved.

For all impromptu themes, the "no cassettes" group improved more than the other groups in all areas (Table 3). Yet, on development, sections 2 and 3 "cassettes only" groups (96.9 and 25 percent) were superior to the "no cassettes" groups (66.7 and 9.9 percent) (Tables 5 and 7). One section, then, reversed rather convincing results with what seem to be atypical and weighty results of minus -22.2 improvement for "cassettes only" and 9.1 percent improvement for "no cassettes" (see Table 9). This dominating of results by one section might be less likely to occur with more students and sections involved.

Another variable was the difference in teacher situations. The project director had used the technique for almost three years, but he was housed in an office which became intolerably hot in the summer afternoons and had decided early in the summer to resign from the university and to quit teaching. The other instructor was enthusiastically new to the technique, housed in an air conditioned office and interested in continuing the use of cassettes the next year (and he is using them now). To avoid bias in the results, the project director may have overcompensated with time spent helping "no tape" students. By contrast, the other instructor found that he spent more time with the cassette correcting than he had previously spent with papers. Whatever the reasons, the results (Appendix 1), with the small groups involved, can only indicate that further evaluation is worth considering.

The subsequent records of 21 students who used cassettes when they were in 1968 and 1969 remedial English classes of the project director were also evaluated. The usual freshman English performance of remedial English students at Utah State University is a D (1.0) average. The students from the project director's classes averaged 1.47 in English 1, 1.68 in English 2, and 1.43 in English 3.

The need for further research was substantiated by the project's anonymous questionnaire (Appendix 2). Of 22 students who chose to return it, only 1 rated the cassette method as less effective than usual methods. Also, 16 recommended using it in more writing classes. Most students think it works, and results for section 2 indicate that it works very well for many. The questionnaire also elicited the suggestion from several students that cassette criticisms should be used for correspondence courses and almost entirely in place of classroom time in writing courses. The instructors involved in this project agree with these suggestions.

In summary: (1) the project results proved that criticizing writing by using cassettes might result in significantly greater improvement in writing skills for students of some teachers, and (2) addition of class criticisms to cassette criticisms seems to produce poorer results than class or cassette criticism alone.

CONCLUSIONS:

Because criticizing on cassettes did produce some improvement, as high as 93.9 percent in writing, further evaluation of the technique is warranted.

Such evaluations should be expanded in both size and time:

1. Too few teachers and sections involved seemed to cause inconclusive results. Probably the effective minimum would be three teachers with two sections each.

2. The "tapes-plus-class" group consistently showed the least improvement; the groups should therefore be limited to a "cassettes only" and a "no cassettes" group.

3. Any further evaluation should be done during the regular school year to avoid summer term registration problems, non-normal student grouping and other related problems.

4. Records from the project director's previous students indicate that improvement over the longer term may be greater than improvement within a quarter. Any followup study should be continued through an entire year.

5. A project during the regular school year could advantageously include provision for introducing other teachers to use of the cassettes.

Whether or not it can be done within the scope of an expanded study, some evaluation should be made of using cassettes with correspondence courses in writing.

It is possible, of course, that some teachers could not improve their instruction through use of cassette criticisms. It is probable that cassette criticisms alone may not be as effective as cassette criticisms combined with other methods of criticizing student papers. Therefore, however effective it may be for some teachers, cassette criticism should be used only to the extent that it helps the individual teacher to improve his instruction and his communication with the student.

Because criticizing with cassettes does seem to help some teachers to improve student writing, teachers should try using cassette criticisms.

Appendix 1

Improvement in Writing

Summary Tables 1 through 9

Improvement in Writing

Table 1
Take-home & Impromptu Themes Combined
(All Students)

		Idea & Development		Organization		Mechanics		Total	
All Students	Post	6.15		6.20		5.40		5.90	
	Pre	5.50		6.05		5.35		5.40	
	Difference	.65	11.8%	.15	2.5%	.05	.9%	.50	9.3%
Group #1 Cassettes only	Post	6.40		6.55		5.65		5.90	
	Pre	5.50		6.15		5.65		5.50	
	Difference	.90	16.4%	.40	6.5%	.00	0%	.40	7.3%
Group #2 Cassettes & Class	Post	5.85		5.95		4.90		5.45	
	Pre	5.80		6.25		5.20		5.50	
	Difference	.05	.9%	-.30	-4.8%	-.30	-5.8%	-.05	1.0%
Group #3 No Cassettes	Post	6.30		6.20		5.85		6.95	
	Pre	5.25		5.80		5.10		5.30	
	Difference	1.05	20.0%	.40	6.1%	.75	12.7%	1.65	31.1%

Improvement in Writing

Table 2
Take-home Themes
(All Students)

		Idea & Development		Organization		Mechanics		Total	
All Students	Post	6.8		6.8		5.7		6.7	
	Pre	6.2		6.5		5.8		5.8	
	Difference	.6	9.7%	.3	4.6%	.1	1.8%	.9	15.5%
Group #1 Cassettes Only	Post	6.8		7.1		6.1		6.6	
	Pre	5.9		6.4		5.5		5.7	
	Difference	.9	15.3%	.7	10.9%	.6	10.9%	.9	15.8%
Group #2 Cassettes & Class	Post	6.5		6.6		5.2		6.0	0%
	Pre	6.4		7.1		5.5		6.0	
	Difference	.1	1.6%	-.5	-7.0%	-.3	5.5%	.0	
Group #3 No Cassettes	Post	7.2		6.8		6.3		7.0	
	Pre	6.2		6.2		5.7		5.8	
	Difference	1.0	16.0%	.6	9.7%	.6	10.5%	1.2	20.7%

Improvement in Writing

Table 3
Impromptu Themes
(All Students)

		Idea & Development		Organization		Mechanics		Total	
All Students	Post	5.5		5.6		5.1		5.1	
	Pre	4.8		5.6		5.1		5.0	
	Difference	.7	15.0%	.0	0%	.0	0%	.1	2.0%
Group #1 Cassettes Only	Post	6.0		6.0		5.2		5.2	
	Pre	5.1		5.9		5.8		5.3	
	Difference	.9	17.6%	.1	1.7%	-.6	-10.3%	-.1	-1.9%
Group #2 Cassettes & Class	Post	5.2		5.3		4.6		4.9	
	Pre	5.2		5.4		4.9		5.0	
	Difference	.0	0%	-.1	-1.9%	-.3	-6.5%	-.1	-2.0%
Group #3 No Cassettes	Post	5.4		5.6		5.4		4.9	
	Pre	4.3		5.4		4.5		4.8	
	Difference	.0	0%	-.1	-1.9%	.9	20.0%	1.1	22.9%

Improvement in Writing

Table 4
Take-home Themes
Section #2

		Idea & Development		Organization		Mechanics		Total	
Section	Post	7.3		7.3		.7		7.9	
#2	Pre	6.7		6.9		6.3		6.2	
Total	Difference	.6	8.9%	.4	5.8%	.7	11.1%	1.7	27.4%
Group #1	Post	6.9		7.3		6.7		7.1	
Cassettes	Pre	5.6		5.8		5.6		5.4	
Only	Difference	1.3	23.2%	1.5	25.9%	1.1	19.6%	1.7	31.5%
Group #2	Post	7.1		7.6		6.4		6.9	
Cassettes	Pre	7.2		7.8		7.7		.7	
& Class	Difference	-.1	-1.4%	-.2	-2.6%	-1.3	-16.9%	-.1	-1.4%
Group #3	Post	7.9		7.0		8.0		8.0	
No	Pre	7.2		7.2		5.5		6.2	
Cassettes	Difference	.7	9.7%	-.2	2.8%	2.6	45.5%	1.8	29.0%

Improvement in Writing

Table 5
Impromptu Themes
Section #2

		Idea & Development		Organization		Mechanics		Total	
Section	Post	6.3		6.1		6.1		6.0	
#2	Pre	3.5		4.6		4.5		3.7	
Total	Difference	2.8	80.0%	1.5	32.6%	1.6	35.6%	2.3	62.2%
Group #1	Post	6.3		6.1		5.7		5.8	
Cassettes	Pre	3.2		4.3		4.4		3.0	
Only	Difference	3.1	96.9%	1.8	41.9%	1.3	29.5%	2.8	93.3%
Group #2	Post	6.5		6.1		5.7		6.3	
Cassettes	Pre	3.8		4.1		4.1		3.5	
& Class	Difference	2.7	71.1%	2.0	48.8%	1.6	39.0%	2.8	80.0%
Group #3	Post	6.0		6.0		7.0		6.0	
No	Pre	3.6		5.3		5.0		4.6	
Cassettes	Difference	2.4	66.7%	.7	13.2%	2.0	40.0%	1.4	30.4%

Improvement in Writing

Table 6
Take-home Themes
Section #3

Section	Post	6.93		6.40	
#3	Pre	5.45		6.43	
Total	Difference	0.58	10.6%	-0.03	-.5%
Group #1	Post	5.80		5.90	
Cassettes	Pre	4.90		5.70	
Only	Difference	.90	18.4%	+0.20	3.5%
Group #2	Post	4.60		5.30	
Cassettes	Pre	3.65		5.20	
& Class	Difference	0.95	26.0%	0.10	1.9%
Group #3	Post	7.70		8.00	
No	Pre	7.80		8.40	
Cassettes	Difference	-.10	-1.3%	-1.40	-4.8%

Improvement in Writing

Table 7
Impromptu Themes
Section #3
Total

		Idea & Development	
Section	Post	5.55	
#3	Pre	4.93	
Total	Difference	.62	12.6%
Group #1	Post	6.00	
Cassettes	Pre	4.80	
Only	Difference	1.20	25.0%
Group #2	Post	5.25	4.0%
Cassettes	Pre	5.05	
& Class	Difference	+.20	
Group #3	Post	5.40	
No	Pre	4.95	
Cassettes	Difference	.45	9.9%

Improvement in Writing

Table 8
Take-home Themes
Section # 1

		Mechanics
Section	Post	4.6
#1	Pre	5.0
Total	Difference	-.4 -8.0%
Group #1	Post	5.86
Cassettes	Pre	5.90
Only	Difference	-.04 -.7%
Group #2	Post	4.6
Cassettes	Pre	5.2
& Class	Difference	-.6 -11.5%
Group #3	Post	3.2
No	Pre	3.9
Cassettes	Difference	-.7 -17.9%

Improvement in Writing

Table 9
Impromptu Themes
Section #1
Total

		Idea & Development	
Section	Post	4.7	
#1	Pre	6.1	
Total	Difference	-1.4	-23.0%
Group #1	Post	5.6	
Cassettes	Pre	7.2	
Only	Difference	-1.6	-22.2%
Group #2	Post	3.8	
Cassettes	Pre	6.8	
& Class	Difference	-3.0	-44.1%
Group #3	Post	4.8	
No	Pre	4.4	
Cassettes	Difference	.4	9.1%

Appendix 2

Summary Questionnaire

Summary Questionnaire

Criticism of taped criticisms

class Summary section All
group Total of 22 students from both cassette groups completed the questionnaire.

Instructions: This questionnaire is intended to be anonymous and to elicit your honest reactions and opinions on the use of cassettes to criticize your writing. Do not write your name on the questionnaire unless you want to. Do confine your judgments and comments to the use of cassettes.

1. Overall, compared with usual methods of criticizing your writing, is this method (check one)

4	extremely more effective	17	more effective
0	extremely less effective	1	less effective

Comment:

2. In which of these areas was this type of criticism superior or inferior to other methods?

Superior		The same	Inferior
17	Development	5	0
11	Organization	8	0
6	Mechanics	12	0

Comment:

3. Did any of these -- or other -- problems seem important during your use of the cassettes?

6	Monotony or repetition	2	Cost
0	Impersonal machinery	3	Procrastination
4	Missing other student comments, questions		

Other (Name and describe):

Comment:

4. Did any of these -- or other -- benefits seem important during your use of the cassettes?

10	More interesting comments	7	Increased concentration
3	Personal human voice	4	Getting "my money's worth"
18	Individualized comments, suggestions		

Other (Name and describe):

Comment:

5. Would you recommend any of the following -- or anything?

16 Use this method in more writing classes
0 Use this method fewer times
4 Instructor should make more positive comments
0 Instructor should be more critical
9 Use this method in high school
1 Use this method before high school

Other:

Comment: